

# THE EMBEZZLER, A STORY

BY ROY



AMERICANS generally try to smother their emotions, and many of them are ashamed of displaying sentiment; but I, Dunois, sometime Colonel in the army of France, have known many of your countrymen, and best of all Captain Frederic Brownelle. Once I told you how I first met him, a tanned young fellow in a private's uniform, and how, after we had invaded the German lines and robbed them of their last dirigible, he was given his commission with us, to become a member, in time, of my own regiment.

You don't know all that meant. You can't appreciate that it was as great a regiment as ever rode out in a forlorn cause and charged gaily to meet grim and certain death; that the army talked of it; that—and this with due modesty—we Captains Three were all a part of its history; and that Brownelle gained his place but to add fame to its annals. Aye, he was worthy! That affair at Poissy, the exploit outside of Strasburg, the episode of the spy at the crossing of the Loire, and—oh, well, a score of other places.

I never tried to pry into his confidence after that first night when I learned that he once had been a Captain in your American army and had left it for a woman's sake. A man may not speak a woman's name, even to his comrade, when it involves an affair of the heart; but at last I learned the story from his own lips, after I, his Colonel, had proved worthy of it. I think he told it to me because in the gage of war life is uncertain and he wanted some one to know, in case his was snuffed out as is the candle by a desert wind, that his way had been a hard one and not without unjust travail.

He graduated from that fine academy of yours, that West Point which has set a standard that demands that an officer shall be a gentleman in all that both titles imply. I don't fancy that he was what you Americans call a goody goody in his class; for his later recklessness would show that his blood ran hot and that his spirit was bold. I presume that, like so many of our own French youth have done, he sobered and steadied down when his Government gave him his commission and sent him out to be an example and to command other men. He admitted to me that as Second Lieutenant he was still somewhat uncurbed; but proudly asserted that when he became First he had learned to check his temper. When he became Captain at a very young age, his responsibilities weighed upon him and he began to make amends for all youthful errors and exploits by entering into the work at hand with hearty determination to give his best of brains and effort to his service.

IN course of time, when peace came over your country, he was sent back to the Philippines to take part in the upbuilding of those islands. You should be familiar with all that was done there. I am not; for, as you know, I was then in Algiers, where the world's progress came to us in nothing more than rumors, and the very events of Paris were disjointed tales, either utterly incredible or sadly distorted. My Captain was proud of his work and of the men under him. He wanted to achieve something. And his ambitions were spurred, as are those of so many young men, by the meeting with a girl, a Mlle. Gertrude Sutherland. I gathered from all I know of the story that she was the daughter of a Judge who had been sent out there to reconstruct the laws of those turbulent isles, and that she attracted much attention from the men of Brownelle's age. Anyway, she attracted him.

He had much to commend him. He had breeding and, moreover, had inherited enough of the world's goods to make his pay a secondary consideration. I have told you that even when I first knew him he was good to look upon, and that was after hardship and vicissitude had seamed his face and taken the boyish enthusiasm from his eyes. Ah, he must have been a handsome young blade when first he met and paid court to her!

But the ways of women and Fate are beyond comprehension. Perhaps I should not say that; for after all I am better acquainted with Fate. I have had small time to devote to those other mistresses of destiny.

There was another suitor in her train who enamoured the heart of Miss Sutherland, and I have a mental picture of him given me by Brownelle that night when, lying at the foot of a grassy slope behind a grim and prepared gun, he told me his story. The picture is that of a young fellow appointed from the ranks of the civilians at the time of the Spanish-American War, to become later a First Lieutenant of regulars; a debonair sort of fellow with many accomplishments, which the man who has chosen soldiering as a profession has scant time to learn; a man who could sing and play, who was a good raconteur, and knew the ways to the affections of women. Bah! A soldier needs them not.

I fancy that the civilian Lieutenant Martin was known to his comrades as a good fellow. I fancy his brother officers liked him and overlooked his frequent breaches of discipline. I fancy they grew to recognize in him a man of much ability and charm, and hoped, after each mistake he made, that he would

pull himself together and grace his profession. The esprit de corps of an army lends itself to such hope and to many a blink at discrepancies in such circumstances.

So, for a long time, they all played their game of love and work and play, while the fortifications they were rearing to protect the new American possessions piled up, stone by stone, and the harbors deepened and broadened under their intelligent hands.

It was Brownelle's duty, being in charge of a certain department, to handle the funds for that immense amount of work. Martin was appointed under him, and Martin in turn secured the appointment of the bookkeepers, to which Brownelle lazily assented. Martin was supposed to be a man of independent means. He lived more extravagantly than a commanding General and laughed his way into the good graces of everyone, the commanding General included. Certain it is that he appeared to have laughed his way into the affections of the Judge's daughter, and in time my Captain Brownelle had occasion to know it.

HE went to her one night, in tempestuous mood, and chided her for some slight he fancied he had suffered, and naturally she resented it. He asserted that she was in love with Martin. That was foolish. Quarrels need no encouragement.

"What if I am?" she retorted. "Have you the right to forbid?"

I leave it to you if a young man of spirit would blandly overlook the retort. One word led on to another, and my Captain walked away from the judicial residence in something bordering on a frenzy of anger and jealousy.

He brooded over it in his quarters, and she, woman like, retorted by conspicuously accepting the attentions of Martin. Brownelle did not go near her, nor attempt a reconciliation, being more than ever convinced that Gertrude Sutherland could find happiness through his subordinate alone and—well, I suppose life looked very gloomy. It always does when the way of love goes wrong.

It may have been that the effort to forget the blight of love led Brownelle to devote more attention to his duties than had been his wont; but the net result was that he began to suspect irregularities in the affairs of his department (led to this suspicion by an accident), and it is easy to imagine the panic of worry that gripped him, throat and brain, and led on to his engulfment. He worked cunningly throughout one whole night and the following morning, haggard and distressed, called the cashier of his office to him, and laid before him proofs that there was a discrepancy somewhere between the cash and the accounts. The man broke down and confessed that he too had known it for sometime; but—had received Lieutenant's Martin's promise to make the shortage good.

"Martin! Martin!" Brownelle exclaimed. "Martin took the money, and you abetted it?"

The cashier asserted that it was the truth and began to plead for forgiveness.

"What is the amount? Be sure you know of what you speak and are exact!" Brownelle ordered, and the man pulled from his pocket a slip of paper giving the exact figures at something like fifty thousand dollars of your American money.

BROWNELLE dismissed the cashier, knowing that he could not escape from the harbor, and throughout that day fought a battle of the mind. He shut himself in his private room and threshed the situation out. He liked Martin for his boyishness, despite the fact that he was his successful rival in affairs of the heart, and at first knew nothing but grief. Then it came to him most clearly that he himself was in a certain measure involved, inasmuch as he should have discovered this thieving had he paid closer attention to his duties and less to the pursuit of love; also that exposure of the defalcation would not only land Martin in a federal prison but would wreck the happiness of Gertrude Sutherland, and, by gossip unsavory, drag her into this mire of disaster.

Poor, poor fellow! How he must have suffered! Had Martin been less than a successful rival, it would have been easy; but that he, Captain Brownelle, Martin's superior officer, should be the one to haul him to the bar of justice made the task impossible. It would have appeared that the motive for exposure at that time was in part jealousy. Again there was the certainty that in the investigation which would inevitably come his own career would be blackened by suspicion; for it would be an easy matter in such an imbroglio for an adroit defending

counsel to lead people to believe that perhaps Martin, after all, was largely a scapegoat.

Now, Fred Brownelle was, like most good officers, a very poor business man. He had been devoted to his career rather than to the acquisition of fortune and, adopting a conservative policy, had invested all his own fortune in United States Government bonds, of which he had a round fifty thousand dollars' worth. Discouraged by this sudden ill fortune, despairing of love, and yet wishing to shield both Gertrude Sutherland and Martin—whom he liked—he made a desperate resolve. And this was its culmination:

HE sent for Martin that night, and the Lieutenant, whistling and careless, came into the room, to be confronted by a young-old man who had suddenly become stern and accusing.

"Martin," he declared bluntly, "I have to-day learned that you have embezzled Government funds from our department!"

Imagine him sitting there, white and grim and cold, glaring at the young Lieutenant, whose face blanched and whose hands hung at his sides in a sudden paralysis of exposure! Think of the soft wind rustling the palms outside, where the tropical moonlight lent white radiance to the night, rustling the palm fronds as if whispering of scandal, disgrace, and the wreck of loves and careers. *Sacré!* It must have been a tragedy, voiceless and dominant, yet hard and cold and invasive, in which they two played the master parts.

"Give me a chance, can't you, Captain?" the Lieutenant whispered huskily, thus admitting his guilt. "Give me a chance, can't you, to make it good? I know I took the money and did wrong; but I hoped to make it good when the next mail came in from home. I did—I swear to you I did! For God's sake, give me time, sir!"

Brownelle, hollow eyed probably and haggard, sat



there and stared at him, while the night breeze crept into diapason. I think his mind had been made up before he sent for the Lieutenant and—call it quixotic if you will, but I like him for his decision. It savored of the old days of chivalry when men made sacrifice for friends, and women, and honor.

"Time!" he whispered. "Yes, I'll give you time—till the next steamer arrives. Then something must be done!"

FOR three days those men watched the horizon of the sea, the hoist of signal flags, and the reports pinned out in front of the wireless station, watched



# OF CAPTAINS THREE

## NORTON

them as men condemned and hoping for pardon, or as beleaguered troops waiting for relief. Watched and worked, neither speaking to the other, but going on through the apparent routine of dull duty, blind to their tasks, automaton waiting for the heavens to fall. Damocles beneath the suspended sword could have known no greater dread than those men waiting for a steamer from across the seas.

It came, and when its mail was distributed the Lieutenant, beaded with the cold sweat of despair, went into the Captain's office and dropped into a chair with his head bent over on his arms. The story was plain.

"They didn't send it!" he confessed. "They didn't send it! What are you going to do with me?"

His humiliation and repentance were so palpable that Brownelle, even in that moment of suspended judgment, pitied him, the boyish officer who had laughed his way through all the months they had known together, but who, perchance, would laugh no more. It was a horrible wreck for all of them. He told me that even in that time of agony he felt, above the deadly apathy that had come over him, a pang of sympathy for Martin's terrible misdirection and mistake.

"Go!" he ordered very quietly. "Go! I'll think it over and—we'll see. We'll see what can be done."

The young fellow staggered from the room, and Brownelle sat for a long time looking out into spaces of a hopeless future. He got up wearily and began to make preparations for the only course he could see before him. He packed his little personal belongings and destroyed such as he could not carry. He was burning all bridges of his career, that none might ever know of his dreams and hopes. His last act was to write a letter to Lieutenant Martin. I can quote it yet, so strongly did his repetition impress me:

Martin, I'm making good for you! I shall take the steamer which leaves this morning, and from Hongkong

that the ways of jilted lovers were akin to madness, and that the mind of youth no man knoweth. He tried to get Brownelle to reconnoiter; but before his speech was ended the man had gone.

My Captain told me that he walked the decks, night and day, until he came to Hongkong, where he cabled to his banker to forward the fifty thousand dollars' worth of bonds to Lieutenant Martin in Manila. And then came the relaxation. He dreaded to return home to meet the wondering questions of those who had known that all his life was wrapped in his profession, and furthermore he knew that for the first time in his life he must work to eke out an existence. He had nothing more than a few hundred dollars saved from his salary and his profession. He had no hope from the past, and a cheerless future which he must needs to conquer or—go down a failure.

I CAN'T tell you of all he did. He tried to get work engineering through China, he floated through India, and on the Suez he subsisted by day labor when his money was all gone. He worked his way as a stoker to Marseilles, and in time came to Paris. As a stoker that his ill luck would never end, and for more than two years he struggled as best he might—until finally there came the alarm of war. It was the call of his old profession, the call of arms, and he answered it by enlisting in the French army as a private.

You know how it resulted. Merit cannot be whipped. It rises unconquerable and phoenixlike from the ashes of dead hope to reach its own place. And so, from that day when I met him by my broken motor car, his fortunes seemed to mend, until, as a climax, I saw him come before an army on parade to receive the cross of the Legion of Honor—the bauble—and a commission as Captain in the army of France.

The war was over in three months—the war that resulted in a draw and impoverished two nations! Fiercely it was fought, and in that fierce fighting he had his share, as did all of us. He gained more than our respect and comradeship; he earned our love. He was one of us, was banded into that shipwreck of the Captains Three. Knowing his shipwreck of love and, from my advanced age, able to estimate his colossal misfortune, I tried to make attractive his new career, so unexpectedly opened, and sometimes I think I succeeded; but ever and anon I would surprise the heartbreak in his eyes and know that did he gain the baton of a *maréchal* of France yet would he long for the glories of that other career, fighting for his own country—and for the clasp of a woman's hand.

IT was fully three months after peace had been declared, and my regiment was quartered in Paris, that the curtain was dropped on the tragedy of the life of Captain Frederic Brownelle, whose first acts had taken place in the tropical isles on the far side of the world.

I had taken up my quarters in my old apartments in the Latin Quarter, yes, here in the Boule Miche, dividing my time between here and Fortress Number Three, where I was stationed, when a man came to my door one night and was admitted. He was of my age and spoke most fluent French.

"I am Colonel Richardson," he said, "of the United States army, on a special mission. I have the honor of speaking to Colonel Dunois of the Chasseurs d'Afrique, of France?"

I affirmed his identification and proffered him a seat.

"You have in your command," he went on, with American abruptness, "Captain Frederic Brownelle. I want him and have come for him."

Lepard had been in my back apartment, making himself at home, as did all of us Captains Three, or for that matter the Captains Four, and now he came out, fierce and harsh in appearance. I introduced him, and then turned to Colonel Richardson. I suppose both Lepard and I exhibited marked hostility; for I am sure we both believed that our American comrade was to be hauled back to his native land for trial. Knowing the story as I did from the inside, I was indignant.

"Colonel," I said, "the man is my friend. He wears the Cross of the Legion, and has honored me by his friendship as well as his confidence. He is a gentleman and a soldier, and to take him from us would be a serious mistake. You have the authority, perhaps, to arrest him; but you shall not get him if it is within my power to prevent! You shall not, I say, and I mean all that the statement implies! I would fight for him!"

"And I!" came the booming voice of Lepard, who was bristling with determination.

The Colonel's eyes twinkled. "He has evidently told you his side of the story," he said. "You are indeed in his confidence!"

Lepard looked puzzled, but held his determined front, and I, annoyed, declared:

"Yes, he has so favored me, and before we go further I wish to say that I believe his side of it and—as his friend—represent him!"

"And I!" again exclaimed Lepard, who, as a matter of fact, knew nothing whatever of Brownelle's past and nothing save that he was his friend.



Looking Out Into a Hopeless Future.

To our surprise the American Colonel broke into a laugh and then tugged at his mustache, with the evergrowing twinkle in his eyes. "If I gave you my word, on the honor of an officer and a gentleman," he asked, "that I come as Captain Brownelle's friend, would you send for him? Could you bring him here within a short time?"

I studied the Colonel's face for a long time before answering, and then accepted his attitude. No officer uses such obligation without meaning it. Between men of the sword it has the ring of pure gold.

"If you mean him well," I answered slowly, "I could have him here within say—"

"Twenty minutes," Lepard interrupted. "I left him down at the Café Pantheon, and it is not his night on duty."

"Get him, will you, Louis?" I said, and Lepard hurried away.

THE Colonel leaned over and talked to me rapidly and— Well, this is what happened: When he went down stairs I went with him and brought up two other guests, one of whom was as fair a lady as I have ever known, Mlle. Gertrude Sutherland, and the other a man who laughed with candid eyes and waited with us for the arrival of the American wanderer. Accompanied by Lepard, Brownelle at last came and, when he saw who was within, halted, rigid and white, in the doorway. He looked first at Richardson, who had been his old commanding officer, and then across at the girl, who had risen to her feet and was standing with her hands clasped before her, her eyes fixed on his in entreaty. Young Martin stood and watched as if waiting for the Colonel to speak, and Lepard—good old Louis!—appeared prepared for anything.

"Fred," the Colonel said, "come over here and shake hands. You have participated in a splendid blunder. Martin made a mistake and borrowed—wrongfully, I admit—a thousand dollars from the funds intrusted to his keeping. Your cashier out there attempted to embezzle a cool fifty thousand dollars, and we recovered the loot from him when he tried to get away to China. He put the blame for his own theft on Lieutenant Martin—who was guilty, after all, in a smaller way, but has never repeated the indiscretion. I have your fifty thousand of Government bonds, and the whole matter was straightened out when Martin found you had made a fool of yourself, and came and made a clean breast of it to me. We have been trying ever since to find you, and never knew where you were until the despatches of a wandering war correspondent told of your being decorated with the Cross of the Legion."

Brownelle gave a great gasp, and for an instant, as if struck a blow, staggered back against Lepard, who manfully caught him. I saw that the girl was leaning forward with the pleading still stronger in her eyes; but Brownelle was staring at his former Colonel like a man coming from a long and trying dream.

"It means," he stammered,—"it means that I'm cleared—that I am—"

"That, if you still wish to be, you are a Captain in the United States army without loss of numbers," the Colonel said, fumbling in his pocket for some papers. "I explained it all to the Secretary of War, and have your reinstatement here."

Brownelle started toward him eagerly; but the Colonel held up his hand.

"Haven't you better speak to Miss Sutherland?" he said softly. "She has waited for this—waited to greet you through all this time—has come with me to find you. Do you understand?"

It is proof that all men are not without perception that four of us, soldiers all,—Colonel Richardson, Lieutenant Martin, Captain Lepard, and I,—walked gravely out of the room, closing the door behind us, and, in my outer chamber, without speaking a word, drank a silent toast to the happiness of those we had left behind.



Brownelle Was Staring at His Former Colonel Like a Man Coming from a Dream.

shall cable to have money sent to meet your embezzlement. I have but one thing to ask in return: That, when I am gone and you marry Miss Sutherland, she shall never be told. I do not have to ask you to be a man; for that is in you, dormant perhaps till now, but certain to be brought out by this lesson, which is costing me all I have and all I had hoped to be. Let there be no other sacrifice than mine; for it is enough. Goodbye!

I suppose his General considered him insane that morning when he aroused him to resign and told him that if the resignation was not accepted he would, regardless, take the outbound boat, which would leave in less than an hour. It may be that the old fellow turned over and shook his head, thinking